

Society and Economy in North-East India

Volume 1

Editor

MIGNONETTE MOMIN

CECILE A. MAWLONG

During the last two decades or so researchers in different universities of Northeast India have revitalized inquiry into the region's pre-colonial history. No doubt they have contributed in varying degrees to the collation and organization of relevant data for their chosen topics and hence provided additional information on the same. But much of the focus of research has been on cultural and political history with hardly any consideration for the socio-economic context in which various institutions emerged and developed.

In this Volume, writers drawn from various parts of the region — both hills and plains, notwithstanding limitation of the areas covered — have tried to address themselves to the hitherto neglected aspects of study. The purpose is to work towards bringing about the integration of the socio-economic, cultural and political history of each area under study so as to arrive at a better understanding of (a) uneven developments within the region, and (b) how and why certain events and actions occurred during pre-British times. It is hoped that this overall effort will encourage further investigations into the intricacies of the peoples' contacts among themselves within the region and the region's interconnectedness with happenings in South Asia and beyond.

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and
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Foreword

The twentieth century has been remarkable for tremendous interest in the history of North-East India. Not only the scholars but also the administrators, the men in uniform, the media and, more than others, the public men — in and outside the region, showed keen interest in the region's past. The stresses and strains of time and circumstances drew the region to an extraordinary focus. The historians responded positively to the growing interests, individually and collectively. The earlier efforts of the amateurs — individuals, organizations and institutions — were progressively reinforced by the establishment of Universities with departments of history in the region after the independence of the country. Our department of history at the North-Eastern Hill University also contributed its share in exploring the source materials and systematizing and interpreting the information relating to the history of the region. The regional history of North-East India happens to be the main thrust area of our department from the beginning and we have been actively involved in creating and managing the North-East India History Association (NEIHA), which is a giant organization today.

To coincide with the Silver Jubilee of the department in 1999, we organized a symposium on trends in research in the history of North-East India. The survey of researches in that connection brought home that although the quantum of research output in the last fifty years has been phenomenal, a lot remains to be done to fill up the important gaps and to understand the process of development in the North-East as a region. In the meantime, the Special Assistance Programme (SAP) was renewed to our department by the University Grants Commission with 'Society and Economy in North-East India' as a thrust area. The SAP Advisory Committee approved our

proposal for financial support to hold seminars in the thrust areas and to publish the proceedings. Accordingly, we decided to hold a series of seminars on society and economy in North-East India from the earliest times to our contemporary period. Three seminars were planned for a thematic study of the Society and Economy in North-East India in a common historical perspective; the first to cover the period from pre-historic times to roughly about the thirteenth century AD, the second, thirteenth to eighteenth century, and the third, nineteenth-twentieth century. It was also decided to publish the papers accepted in the three seminars in three volumes.

The first seminar held on March 4–6, 2002 was an exciting experience in our endeavours to explore and analyse the extant source materials and to review the existing studies for projecting an integrated thematic view of the society and economy in North-East India till about the thirteenth century. The specialists in various aspects of the larger theme across the disciplines responded to our invitation and presented their serious studies, some of which are in the hitherto comparatively least researched pre- and proto- and early historical periods. *Society and Economy in North-East India, Volume 1* contains those studies. Our colleagues, Professor Mignonette Momin and Dr. Cecile Mawlong, who were conveners of the seminar, worked out the scheme of the seminar and have jointly edited the volume with remarkable zeal and care. We expect the volume to be appreciated by a wide circle of readership and to inspire further research in the history of North-East India.



NEHU, Shillong
The 25th March 2003

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Editors' Note

The land that now stands as India's northeast region was subsumed under the name 'Assam' in colonial writings from about the mid-nineteenth century. To writers of that period the region comprised, in its broadest sense, the areas corresponding to the present states of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, as well as contiguous portions within what now constitute North Bengal and Bangladesh. This categorization was essentially in the nature of a broad geographical unit, for it was impractical to consider that entire territory as even a loosely knit political unit at any stage of the region's history. The legacy survived upto the post-British times, except for the fact that the area that is now called Arunachal Pradesh (from 1972 onwards) had been named the North-East Frontier Agency (1954–1972) and had been added to the concept of North-East India.

As in other parts of India, it was British officials charged with the administration of different areas within the region, who were responsible for constructing the histories of its people. William Robinson penned a sort of prelude to historical writing on 'Assam' in his book, *A Descriptive Account of Assam* (London, 1841). The work suffered from limitations of source material, interpretation and coherent geographical/ethnographical knowledge, so the need for a 'proper' history was felt. Edward Gait met that need more than sixty years later when he brought out the first standard text on 'Assam' under the title, *A History of Assam* (London, 1905; 2nd edn. 1926). His book heralded modern history writing in the region.

The focus of Gait's work was political history primarily based on written documents and so the subjects of discussion were the ruling families of the plains where literacy was known.

It is obvious that Gait was influenced by the then-current historical methods prevalent in Europe, which emphasized upon the use of written sources as *the* central defining feature of History; hence the events that he narrated were in the context of those rulers. But even where the plains were the focus of his work he found it impossible to establish any uniformity of periodization for all the lowlands. This was because of the limited quantity of source material on the basis of which he had to construct the history of the region. There was also the problem of differentiations in the British attitude to the ruling families of the region, as is known, for instance, from the subjugation of the Ahom kings and the recognition of the right of other rulers in the region to govern areas under their own jurisdiction (such as Tripura) according to their own conventions. Moreover, Gait could provide only occasional glimpses of what was happening in the rest of the region wherever the rulers of the plains had to interact with the unlettered groups or when the rulers of the latter groups had succeeded in patronizing writers to record their eulogies. To that extent all other sections of the population of both the plains and the hills were by and large left out of the 'main' historical episodes. This sort of academic methods and attitude suited the prevailing imperialistic ideology. That ideology was commensurate with superinducing 'order' in:

- the plains that had — from the British point of view — experienced general insecurity because of internal communal dissensions, endemic raids from the direction of the adjacent hills and/or incursions from across Bengal and Burma from time to time;
- the hills where the welter of tribes had ostensibly been living in 'splendid isolation,' without the rule of law, had known only continual feuding among them and had conducted sporadic raids into the neighbouring settlements in the plains causing disorder, destruction and a recurring sense of insecurity among the victims.

It was supposedly for these reasons that the British found it necessary to intervene in the affairs of the peoples of the plains and hills: to put an end to the disturbances and ensure

the success of colonial policies in the entire region. The histories of the various communities of the hill areas could not be written in the conventional sense because they had not yet attained the literate stage. Hence these latter communities figured in colonial historiography only in the context of British expansion into the hill areas for the purpose of establishing administrative control over them. Alexander Mackenzie's *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes on the North East Frontier of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1884) best illustrates this point. The overall picture that emerged from British historical writings on the hill tribes of northeast India fitted in with the general studies on 'primitive survivals' located in various pockets of Asia, Africa and the Americas, which literary efforts had eventually culminated in the introduction of Anthropology as an academic discipline in 1850 at Oxford University, England. Not surprisingly the imperialistic brand of colonial historiography in India largely focused on the 'transformation' of the 'warlike'/'savage'/'backward' and 'stagnating' tribes (that had resisted the British but had eventually been overcome) into law-abiding subjects of the British Empire. There was no attempt to cloak the writers' sense of duty to introduce 'civilization' in areas that the Westerners had occupied. They projected their 'civilizing' role, which ostensibly aimed at upgrading the quality of life of the people brought under imperial rule, as especially desirable in the context of the various 'primitive' hill communities that could be nurtured to fall in line with the workings of modern institutions.

No doubt the experience of conflicts in mainland India, such as that of the 'Sepoy Mutiny' (1857), and pragmatic administrative exigencies necessitated deeper understanding of the cultures of the people of the country's northeast region. This compulsion seems to have been keenly realized, as even in the plains the majority of the population had not been fully 'acculturated' *vis-à-vis* the 'mainstream' Brahmanical society, while in the greater part of the hills the rule of 'law', from the colonial rulers' perspective, had yet to be implemented. To that end the British initiated ethnographical studies and sponsored publication of monographs on the major tribes of the region at the beginning of the twentieth century. Mapping out the land and its economic potential had already been done from about

half a century earlier. Such studies were meant to arm successive government servants with adequate knowledge about the land and the people in order to consolidate colonial rule. The studies also became the repository of data and observations of historical significance that could be built upon further or subjected to thorough investigation. Simultaneously, the opening of institutions of higher learning provided interested individuals from the region avenues for accessing sources bearing on their own histories and cultures.

When British rule came to an end, anthropological and historical researches in 'Assam' continued under the aegis of the new governments. In the post-British period most anthropologists aimed at understanding 'tribal' cultures on the latter's terms before revolutionary culture change could take place on account of the 'modernizing' process that had been set in motion by the introduction of Western education, medical care and Christian proselytization. The majority of historians sought to systematize and update writings primarily on dynastic, administrative and cultural history based on collation of data largely derived from literary sources. The sources ascribed to the colonial period were principally official documents. Those preceding that period were locally produced manuscripts, inscriptions, coins and other kinds of archaeological record, which finds had been edited, translated or/and annotated through the initiative of the colonial rulers and, later, that of the post-colonial officials/professionals. Post-colonial researchers in the history of northeast India were particularly motivated by the need to address themselves to understanding the 'identities' of the region's numerous communities in the context of the nascent concept of the 'nation-state' that India had come to concretize. The initial response to that quest was to place the identities as far back in time as possible. This was especially true in the case of the literate peoples of the plains, whose roots were often traced back to the beginnings of the 'greater' Indian tradition best embodied in ancient Brahmanical literature comprising the two epics and the *Purāṇas*. As expected, such attempts resulted in highlighting common meeting grounds for events purported to have taken place as part of some grand scheme in the 'pan-Indian' context. This kind of approach underlay the dynastic histories of northern India,

to which the valley kingdoms of the northeast region were 'attached'. Works to this effect can be ascribed to 'mainstream' writers influenced by the nationalist ideology, such as H.C.Raychaudhuri (*Political History of Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1923) and H.C.Ray (*The Dynastic History of Northern India*, II, Calcutta, 1931), as well as writers of regional histories, such as R.G.Easak (*The History of North Eastern India*, Calcutta, 1933) and R.C.Majumdar (*The History of Bengal*, I, Dacca, 1943), among others.

Paradoxically, the earliest history writers amongst the literate sections of northeast India (irrespective of the period under study — pre-British, British or post-British times) lapped up the recognition of the 'oneness' of the valley kingdoms with the more advanced Gangetic valley — chiefly at the cultural and political levels — through the 'common' links derived from Brahmanical tradition. By implication their 'identities' could be traced further back in time at least to the Vedic period, since the antecedents of the epic/Puranic traditions supposedly originated therein! Simultaneously, they tried to harp on the distinct identity of each of the kingdoms within the region and to place their rulers on par with their contemporaries in the Indian mainland. While doing so, they overlooked obvious factors underlying historical processes, i.e., those of geography and the material milieu. They missed out on the linkages between socio-economic conditions and the institutions that evolved in the region, choosing instead to almost indiscriminately apply the yardstick of developments that had taken place in the Gangetic basin to the northeast region even in the absence of substantiation. In the process the history writers overlooked questions of chronological differences, morphological diversities and the corresponding organizational variations as to the rise and development of cultures and their corresponding institutional organizations within the sub-continent including the northeast region. At the same time they highlighted the differences between the plains and the hills within the region and chose to view the peoples of the latter area (as did the earlier writers), as 'isolates'. They conceded contacts between the two culturally different groups only at the level of political relations and of trade, and even those communications were viewed from the perspectives of the

lettered groups. Thus many of the writers tended to persist with ruler-centred depiction of events, which trend they had inherited from the British.

Expectedly most of the works were in the nature of administrative studies and those of cultures pertaining to the period of British rule in the region and its aftermath. This was because of (a) constraints of historical methods that banked on written material to the near-exclusion of other sources (such as archaeological finds, oral traditions, etc.); (b) persistence of the approach initiated by writers of the colonial period, which was characterized by narration of events associated with the historical figures that had been in positions of political and economic power. As a result the histories of the region missed out on the broader social context of those events and generally lacked coherence, comprehensiveness and connectedness.

History writing in northeast India has been ridden therefore with problems of methods and approaches. It was to address these problems and to explore ways of reducing/overcoming them that the History faculty, North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong, organized a Seminar on Society and Economy in Pre-Colonial Northeast India on March 4-6, 2002. The Seminar was sponsored by the ICHR, New Delhi, the UGC-SAP-DRS of the Department of History, NEHU, Shillong, and the NERC-ICSSR, Shillong. The choice of the theme stemmed from the realization that the integration of political, economic and socio-cultural histories of the region had yet to be achieved. The idea was to take stock of the data used and interpreted by writers dealing with the history of the region or with that of specific areas within the region, to reevaluate existing assumptions, to present sources hitherto neglected, misunderstood or overlooked and to discuss possibilities of interpreting the evidence commensurate with the significant advances that have been made in Indian and non-Indian historiography during the last half-a-century. Towards this end the pre-colonial period was identified, keeping in mind the necessity of a broad-based conceptual framework within which the studies were to be fitted in, because of problems in following the generally accepted periodization of Indian history into 'ancient', 'medieval', 'modern' for northeast India. This, despite the nagging awareness that even the concept

'pre-colonial' was fraught with difficulties in terms of its practical application for the entire region. Nonetheless, for the purpose of delimitation, contributors dealing with the history of the people of the plains were requested not to stretch the discussion beyond the thirteenth century, so that the remaining chapters of the precolonial period (upto. about the eighteenth century) could be tackled later. This periodization was tentatively agreed upon considering the possibility of dating on the basis of the extant sources. However, this yardstick could not be applied to the hills of the region, because of the nature of the source-material available, and contributors handling their history were left to deal with topics before the advent of the British into the hill areas. At the very outset therefore the problem of periodization in the region's history became a glaring issue on which many of the participants had something to comment. Related to this was the debate on the use of 'pre-colonial' as a concept. As some rightly pointed out, there had been no uniformity in either the chronology of colonialism or the establishment of colonial economy for the entire region. Most of the participants felt the need for further discussions on such issues confronting history writing in the region and suggested holding follow-up Seminars broadly pertaining to the same theme but in the context of the Ahom, British and post-British period towards a connected history of the region. After all, the history of northeast India is the thrust area of most Departments of History in Universities located in the region. This Volume is the first in the series of academic exercises on the above-mentioned theme.

The essays in this Volume are the revised versions of papers that were presented at last year's Seminar and have been accepted for publication. Admittedly some of them reflect the constraints of constructing aspects of the socio-economic histories of different areas within the region based on the extant sources. This is particularly true of papers on the hills, where there were no written records pertaining to the history and culture of the 'highlanders' prior to the coming of the British, save for occasional references to certain tribal communities in the written sources mainly from the post-twelfth century onwards. The authors have tried therefore to demonstrate possibilities of using less conventional sources,

such as the oral traditions and objects of material culture. They have arranged relevant data from such sources in conjunction with the evidence of the pre-colonial and early colonial source material to indicate socio-economic linkages in the evolution of patterns in society and economy during pre-British times. In doing so some of them have also indicated avenues for combining the research techniques of History with those of related disciplines, particularly Archaeology and Anthropology. Some of the papers on the plains display a more critical use of both literary and epigraphical sources than attempted before. The authors' intention was to arrive at a more holistic picture of socio-economic developments instead of focusing on the actions and achievements of individual rulers, as had been typical of earlier writings. The authors have tried to crosscheck the authenticity of the evidence, wherever possible, with that of numismatics and archaeological remains. Some of the essays in this Volume have resorted to the comparative method in terms of handling sources and using concepts developed in the study of other societies. The authors have thus broadened the scope of probing into aspects of the socio-economic history of the hills and plains of the region by raising new questions and suggesting answers to them. So even in the event that their techniques and approaches are challenged by subsequent studies, their purpose — to present new and alternative sources of information, to reinterpret the evidence of conventional sources, to stimulate new lines of inquiry and reformulation of problems and ideas towards enhancing fruitful new understandings — would still be served.

The Volume begins with a discussion on issues of historiography to highlight the trends, problems and possibilities of studies in the region's society and economy prior to the Ahom period, the commencement of which period can be dated with absolute certainty to A.D. 1228. Thereafter the papers have been arranged area-wise, in the absence of a broad consensus of identical topics cutting across them. But not all areas within the region have been covered. There are three papers on the Khasi-Jaintia, two each on the Mizo and Naga, one on the Meitei, one on the Surma-Barak valley, two on the Brahmaputra valley and one in the context of Bakhtiyâr's invasion of Assam. Some papers have an overlapping of information, though not

necessarily of perspectives. Some other papers have focused on aspects of society more than those of economy. Our task is to present the views and priorities of the authors based on their understanding of the sources and interpretation of the evidence so that readers can draw their own inferences from them. We have provided diacritics in the last four papers, and that too only in the context of *early* (not contemporary) place-names, personal names and non-English common terms as gleaned from the sources written in scripts other than the Roman.

Most of the contributors are members of the History Faculty, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. The others are our colleagues in related disciplines within the University or in the same discipline from outstation academic institutions. We extend our thanks to all of them for meeting the methodological requirements and submitting their papers within the stipulated deadline. Professor David R.Syiemlieh, as Head of the Department of History, NEHU, took the trouble of maintaining communications with the publishers at every stage of the preparation of this Volume for publication. He and the other members of the editorial board — Professors J.B.Bhattacharjee and Manorama Sharma — gave us valuable advice in the course of editing this Volume. To them we extend our gratitude. Errors in editing, if any, are entirely of our own making.

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Mizo Tribes in Transition

Vanlalruata Rengsi

A great deal of conjecture and guesswork¹, woven together with folk tradition, forms to this day, the fabric of Mizo history before the advent of the British. They come in different colours, shapes, and sizes, with different motifs and motives¹. New ones are being fashioned until date by new authors, by rearranging the designs or by enlarging the span, to suit new socio-cultural-political² and psychological needs and aspirations. As a case in point, the problem of origin has opened a huge "blind spot" enthusiastically exploited by some, obviously with motivated interests, to suggest linkages and antecedents untenable, if not ludicrous.³

This paper is a digression from those commented upon. Its main intent is to achieve a rational overview and perspective, and to understand Mizo society from its very inception through a concept. There exists no documentary evidence of the existence of such tribes as named "Mizo" even just a few centuries back. 'At best, the history of the Mizo could be traced to about five hundred years'.⁴ However, the main outline of their "hoary" past and their vicissitudes may be understood by adopting a broad and general framework, from focusing on the basic premise of the prime mover of history: technology. The concept amplifies the fact that all societies are dynamic and changing. This repudiates the tendency to conceptualize past societies in a mould as the word "traditional" has come to imply. Technology as a concept may be understood as:

the expression of man's working relationship with the natural world, the point at which environment and society meet and shape each other. His tools, his medicines and his weapons are the physical form of his conceptions, their effectiveness a matter of life and death. The means he uses to produce, preserve, and organize and destroy give varying returns for effort; and these differences in efficiency account for many of the differences between the social institutions with which they are related.⁵

Accepting the fact that universally, among other things, 'food stands on a footing different from all other materials, since it is the only substance that man had always had to seek'⁶ and that 'the general ecological character of the human groups was determined at first exclusively, later very largely, by how they got their food'⁷, we can contextualize the Mizo tribes from a panoramic historical situation:

The advance of irrigation agriculture in eastern and southern Asia displaced people employing less intensive modes of cultivation. Intensive cultivation in India pressed against hill tribes engaged in slash and burn agriculture, such as the Mundas and the Araons of Bihar. In China the Han people assumed their historical identity as their irrigation - based political economy developed after 700 B.C. To the south of them were "non-barbarians" — Mong (Miao), Yu Mien (Yao), and Tai speakers. As the Han advanced across the Yangtze River into "barbarian" territory, they incorporated some of the groups with agricultural and political patterns similar to their own, while pushing back the slash and burn cultivators into more mountainous or inhospitable regions. Elsewhere the migratory cultivators withdrew to inaccessible hinterlands.⁸

By extending the above observation and explanation we may suggest that, by 'following the movement of the peoples who now occupy the land mass in South-East Asia' and 'taking into consideration the pattern of movement in historic times, we are more inclined to think that the Mizo came to their

present land from south-western China through the corridor of north-western Myanmar via the Irrawady valley.⁹ As far back as can be remembered of their past, the Mizo tribes were shifting cultivators. They can be therefore, justifiably, accounted as being among those people who were displaced by the Han ascendancy in China as far back as 700BC.¹⁰

From a very early date, swiddening was a constant factor acting on the Mizo people and having a direct bearing on their mores and attitudes towards life. The compulsion to their shifting of villages necessitated by the constant requirement of new plots acted as a constraint, which marginalized their life in a number of ways. They were not able to settle down in one place and develop better surroundings as settlements had always to be abandoned. This acted as a deterrent for building roads, permanent edifices, or making and manufacturing use items and assets that were not easily transportable. Shifting also thwarted specialization of the arts and thereby making improvement on material culture restrictive. However, on the obverse, this limiting condition promoted the continued egalitarian nature of the society, sharing of resources, the nullification of private property and absence of class antagonism and alienation. Their material life would necessarily depend upon their ability to avail of virgin forests for agriculture and proximity to more advanced cultures sharing in the fringe benefits that accrued from it.

We may further fill up the void concerning the past of the Mizo by configuring them as follows:

New tribes as well as new gentes were constantly forming by natural growth...The method was simple. In the first place there would occur a natural outflow of people from some overstocked geographical centre, which possessed superior advantage in the means of subsistence. Continued from year to year, a considerable population would thus be developed at a distance from the original seat of the tribe. In course of time the emigrants would become distinct in interests, strangers in feeling, and last of all, divergent in speech. Separation and independence would follow, although their territories were contiguous. A new tribe was thus created.¹¹

Though the time frame and the period of the long trek of these people over a process of many centuries can hardly be ascertained, some inferences can be made to suggest the route of their migration. To this day the Mizo have a memory and a name for the Chindwin River. The Lusei call it *Run* and the Paite call it *Tuikang*. The Lusei word for sea is *tuifinriat* which suggests the Irawaddy river with its eight branches in the deltaic area as it flows to the ocean. Certain traits of their culture must have been moulded and formed from very early times. Practices like headhunting must have been deeply woven into their culture before their settlement in Burma. In fact, the practice of headhunting and the rituals associated with it is strongly reminiscent of the practice of the Chin State of China where on the death of the Emperor countless people were killed including their servants and bodyguards so that the Emperor may not go unaided into the next world.

There is no reason to doubt that the Mizo had come to the area between the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy rivers by the 8th century. But it is unlikely that they ever evinced any culture of real permanence or kingdom¹² as their agricultural system would always vitiate against this. Oral tradition and Burmese chronicle allude to the fact that Mizo people and the Burmese had a long peaceful relationship¹³. The bulk of the Mizo kept to themselves while in Burma but enjoyed some of the fringe benefits of the culture without being submerged or assimilated by it.¹⁴ Some may have availed of wet and permanent fields, severing the bind that held their tribal moorings, drifting to the culture that naturally emanates from it and subsequently integrating with the Burmese. But for most, continued migration caused by the nature of their technology and the series of chain reaction resulting from Mongol military expeditions must have made these tribes leave Burma.

Though there is no reliable account of the size and strength of the Mizo tribes while they were settled in Burma, oral traditions allude to their oneness. Despite the lack in exact information as to their settlement patterns when in Burma, it can be accepted that they had some amount of cohesion and unity at that time. All this changed after they dispersed from there. Their departure from Burma was not planned, concerted, or uniform. First of all, they seem to have left in great haste.

Then, they left in small groups — one in the wake of the other. Lastly, they were heading to territories of which they had little or no advanced information. With all these factors prevailing, the situation resulted in them scattering hither and thither, so to say — a veritable diaspora. This dispersal from a common settlement is known to the Mizo as *Thlangtlak*, indicating a general westerly direction. Each group pledged to those who would follow in their rear, that they would mark their trail by cutting off the bark of trees as they made their way through the jungles. But subsequently, the harsh reality of the new environs against which they were pitted, belittled and upset whatever they nurtured of familial ties and kinship. As the dictates of survival took reign, the world of the Mizo was redefined.

The Mizo had to leave Burma helter skelter and in small groups. This had far reaching consequences. Firstly, it nurtured in them a deep feeling of insecurity and sense of loss. Secondly, they were unable to maintain linkage and contact with each other. These factors combined to turn them into mutually hostile groups. Cut off from civilization, condemned to live like fugitives, they lamented the sorry state of their existence. Though the thickly canopied jungle, almost impenetrable, protected them from pursuit, it cast its spell of dark foreboding. It hosted not only the many wild animals, reptiles, birds, and insects; it was domain to myriads of malevolent spirits.

Under these given conditions, hilltops became the natural choice for siting of settlements. Probably, at this time numbering less than a hundred thatched huts, if not less, these fortified 'village republics' were perched on steep hills ascending from ravines, forests, thickets and underbrush. A strong common ethos ran through them. All shared a common culture and language. Ensnared and emasculated in the deep fastnesses of the jungles, they were literally untouched by outside cultures and influences resulting in the conceptualization of a world view and eschatology that determined human relationships at the societal level (i.e. within the village) and outside (i.e. in relation to other villages). A strong element of group survival prevailed within the village manifested by close co-operation and help rendered to each other in the labour process, with sharing, selflessness and sacrifice (*tlawmngaihna*) as a guiding principle of human conduct. While such considerations pre-

veiled within the walls of the village ramparts, the external world was viewed as hostile and pregnant with imminent danger to its inhabitants. When venturing outside the comforting cocoon of home and hearth, the Mizo was a predator.

Agriculture was the main artery of their lifeline in their relationship with nature. However, the suddenness of their departure from Burma and the difficulties of terrain in the Chin Hills must have hindered their growing of rice. At this time they had to subsist on other crops — millet, maize, and large beans called *Ra*. The Mizo originally sowed the rice seeds by scattering them with the hand. Then it was found that the seeds that fell on the small hollows of tracks of deer and other animals grew better. From then on holes were made for the seeds. At this stage, tools were simple and crude. Dibbling sticks and animal horns were used for digging holes in sowing.¹⁵

They brewed beer out of millet and maize, which was likely their only drink in those days.¹⁶ Bereft of metal tools, deer antlers were greatly sought for agricultural tools. They were poorly clad with hemp skirts girdled on their loins. While cereals provided the mainstay of life, they effectively exploited the ready and abundant resources of their habitat. They hunted, reared animals, and collected wild plants as food. While the need for agricultural land was an important factor that determined the ecological conditions that prevailed between the villages, the situation was further aggravated by the compulsions that arose from the need for meat and salt. The Mizo were voracious meat eaters and only little could be had by animal husbandry. Hunting naturally played a very dominant role in the economic activity and had connotations attached to it which made it an undertaking vital to the survival of the village:

Traditions of origin are often more connected with hunting than with agriculture.. a secession is usually preceded by the discovery of an area rich in games, and the founder is often reputed to have been a great hunter....only a good hunter dared risk settling on a new land away from his brothers. ... Tradition has it that most of the founders of present day villages were

hunters, clearly showing the importance of this activity in the process of segmentation.¹⁷

Hunting provided the key aspect of food production.¹⁸ Besides enhancing vital protein food hunting trips and expeditions established the extent of control by the village of the surrounding area. It also promoted the training of young men in discipline, the art of survival and war. Each village tried to cut a wide berth for itself the surrounding area for its future swiddening. Hunters invariably foraged far and deep in the jungles, prowled around the neighbouring areas, jealously laying claim to as much land as they could. Obligated to procure their own salt, they searched for salt licks, which were not always located in close vicinity of the village. Salt licks saw many scuffles and skirmishes and also provided occasions for bloody feuds. ...¹⁹

Society was organized along clan lines divided into families. There were no chiefs at first. The need for chiefship arose with the cumulative effect of the prevailing conditions where a high premium was demanded by the considerations for security²⁰. Each village began to elect one and normally* chose its chief from within the clan itself. No tax was paid to the chief but each member of the clan was obliged to render labour service (two to three days of the year) to him. The chief also had the privilege of primacy in choosing land for cultivation.²¹

Though the institution of chieftainship was endorsed at this time, society did not depart from its given egalitarian character. Defense did not become the sole responsibility, and the monopoly, of the chief. Every able-bodied male was responsible for the defense of the village. A man combined all the roles necessary for the survival of his family and the village. There were no full time warriors, priests, peasants, etc. as such. With the exception of the chief, everyone had to cultivate their plot of agricultural land, rear animals, furnish housing and clothing, and brew *zu*. A definite division of labour prevailed, established mainly on the basis of sex and age. Although agriculture was a joint effort, the men were responsible for the hewing down of trees and preparing the *jhum* site. Defense and hunting was entirely the duty and privilege of the men. The men fashioned out the material of use items and requirements

of domestic life while the women performed all the household chores. Both sexes shared in house building and equally took part in the merriment and festivities. The bachelors' dormitory had not evolved during this time. Young men slept either in their own huts or in the chief's. Among the Pawi²² young men slept together in the house having an attractive unmarried woman.²³

By the early 16th century the Mizo were located on both sides of the Tiau (local name of a segment of the Kolodyne river, which now forms a natural international boundary between India and Myanmar). Most of the clans who now inhabit the present Mizoram were still on the eastern side of the river, between two mountain ranges - Thantlang and Lentlang. They were preceded to the western side by the Mirawng, Rengpui, Darlong, Ruankhum, Tlangau, Pang, and Chawrai. Various hills and villages, which the earlier groups had settled in, retain their old names, such as Biате, Chhungte, Darngawn, Khawbung, Khawzawl, Ngur, Thiak, Vankal, *Zote*, etc.²⁴ Rivers and villages still bear the names given by these groups.²⁵ While the Rengpui was settled in the north at Kolasib a large group of clans occupied the lowlands of Champhai and the surrounding hills scattered in many villages. Located north of them, the Lusei group called them northerners, or Hmar. These tribes were enjoying a better life as the area they occupied enabled them to plant rice. Their contact with the plains of Assam, i.e. Cachar and Chittagong benefited them in a number of ways.²⁶ They were mostly led by Thadou chiefs and had uprooted the Hallam and the Hrangkhawl clans who came before them. After this expulsion the Halam and Hrangkhawl made their appearance in Cachar, Tripura and Syhlet and came to be known as Kukis²⁷.

A landmark in the history of the Mizo occurred with the momentous movement of the Lusei groups crossing the Tiau river led by their Thangur chiefs during the early part of the 18th century²⁸. It had far reaching consequences on the demographic structure, polity formation, and inter-tribal relations and politics of the Mizo. This movement of the Lusei was compelled by the natural need of new forests for their swiddening and the incessant harassment from the Pawi. Therefore, the weakest and most vulnerable were the first to forage into new lands. The Palian were the first. They entered into the central

area of the present Mizoram. The Zadeng took the northernmost route through Tualbung village, the Thangluah and Rivung moved in from the south, and the Rokhum to the center. The Sailo, the latest to arrive, pushed against the Rokhum and the Zadeng. The situation that prompted their movements on a westerly direction, and the process of settling into new lands, brought about an intensification of the struggle between the tribal groups. In the process of long internecine struggle the power of the chiefs became substantially strengthened. Consequently, there was expulsion of various clans further away, decimation and reduction of many villages, absorption and induction of the uprooted or displaced population to the villages that were dominant and, ultimately, in the increase in size and strength of these prevailing villages with population becoming more composite and society more complex.

The shift of settlement of the Lusei group to the western side also brought about a marked improvement in their material life. It enabled them to cultivate rice and cotton, and to avail of iron from the plains of Cachar. Order and discipline was also brought about in the agricultural work leading to better cohesion and return in labour inputs. Till then, there was no order or conformity in choosing of plots and firing. Plots were wildly scattered about, as people were free to pick their own sites. Firing was also done at one's own convenience. This had disastrous results, as fires tended to be out of control, decimating huge areas that were outside of cultivation. The surrounding land was quickly reduced to waste as the topsoil, in those forests that were burnt down but not cultivated, became denuded and unfit for cultivation. The result was that villages were shifted more often as virgin forests were always sought for.²⁹ These factors, which impinged upon them at this time, necessitated a restructuring of society.

Chieftainship rose to the occasion as demanded or dictated by the prevailing conditions. There came strict procedures with regard to cultivation and village life. From then on, people could not choose sites for cultivation, or set fire to their plots, at their own will. The chief, with the village elders (mostly clan leaders), determined the sites for the year's cultivation, and fixed the dates for firing. Now the whole village worked in plots contiguous or adjacent to each other's. This facilitated better

defense with everyone working shoulder to shoulder. A big house was constructed in which all young and unmarried men slept. By concentrating the manpower of the village this served as a standing and alert militia. By this time, the eastern tribes were able to obtain iron from the plains of Assam-Cachar, and these were forged into small hoes for the sowing of seeds. Before this hoe came into effective use, the *chem*³⁰ was used for digging the holes for planting of seeds. Each village was enhanced with a blacksmith who forged iron tools and who, like the chief, was given a portion of the households' produce of rice and of animals killed in the hunt.³¹

The improvement in agriculture and hunting due to better tools, weaponry and village organization resulted in overall improvement in material life and a marked increase in food surplus. There was regular feasting to celebrate the seasonal breaks of the tedious and demanding rice tending. Expeditions to distant places were also undertaken during these breaks but particularly after harvesttime. It was only after fulfilling the requirements of the basic needs of survival that the Mizo undertook raids or hunting excursions. The cultivation of rice not only took up most of their time but "became the fulcrum of people's lives, the sole source of survival, and around this activity were woven their customs, culture, measure of time, quantities and distances"³². Falling in rhythm with the monsoons, plots were cleared in the dry months of December or early January and set afire in May. Rice was planted before the onset of the rains in May followed immediately by weeding which continued till August. While at this time the rice stalks would have grown to substantial height and weeding was dispensed with, there was need to prepare the various implements necessary for the harvesting to come, and also to guard the crops from being devoured by birds and animals. It was only in December, when the grains had been brought in to the granary that the Mizo could reassuredly set out from the village.

The surplus production that accrued from improved agriculture promoted elaborate rituals and ceremonies facilitating elevation of status leading to a nascent class differentiation and stratification within the community. However the given ecological equation hindered whatever the human mind might have conceived or contrived towards aspiration of

self-aggrandizement beyond a limited scope. From within, with the primary method of food production — agriculture, still necessitating shift of settlements, there was no way by which accumulation could be sustained. Shifting agriculture, regardless of surplus, prompted dissipation of accumulated wealth. At the same time, the need to shift settlements regularly hindered the acquisition of movable property, which had to be limited to a minimum. From without, the fluid political condition imposed upon the denizens of the villages a strong suggestion for group survival. Strength not only in numbers was necessary, but also of cooperation, mutual assistance and sharing.

Therefore, the process of elevation of status followed from the principle of a mutually benefiting scheme. Whether he be a hunter or cultivator, the incumbent had to benefit the society to get the ordination of status. The hunter got acclaimed for killing enemies, predatory animals, and bringing meat to the villagers; the agriculturist performed feasts, providing liberal amounts of *zu* (rice beer) and meat of the *sial* (local breed of wild bison) for the whole community. In fact, in the climax of the ceremony, the couple (man and wife) while being paraded in the village street on stretchers, threw away even acquired property such as guns and use items that were dearly prized. Vanity was indulged only to those who, at great pains to themselves, mustered their resources for the well being of the group. Folk memory is dim concerning those who performed the feasts of merit — *Khuangchawi*, but panegyricizes, with great passion and pride, the story of the men who stood humble, but displayed courage and self denial in those times when life was "cruel, brutish, and short".

The harassment from the Pawi turned out to be, in the long run, rewarding to the Sailo chiefs. Seven of the Sailo chiefs formed a conglomeration at Selesih in the first decades of the 18th century³³. This seven thousand strong village was able to stem Pawi incursion effectively for a time and also enhanced the Sailo against other groups. The Tiau became the natural boundary between the Sailo and the Pawi. Following this, the Sailo shattered the power of their cousins (the other branches from the line of the Thangur chiefs) — the Rivung, Palian, Rokhum and Zadeng. Having tested their strength against their immediate neighbours successfully, the Sailo then engaged with

the northern groups under the Thadou chiefs. The Thadou had previously driven out the Hallam and the Hrangkhawl groups into Cachar, Tripura and Syhlet where they were designated as Kuki. The struggle between the Thadou and Sailo chiefs was bitter and bloody. In the end (about the middle of the 19th century), most of these villages of the Thadou were obliged to flit to the plains of Cachar and the southern hills of Manipur. There, in turn, the Thadou became identified as the New Kuki.

The Selesih conglomeration did not last long. The underlying forces (technological-environmental) exerted on the society could not be averted. Selesih had to disintegrate into smaller villages tenable to the needs of people for jhum sites within walking distance from the village. In fact, within a short time, with their more distant cousins and kindred humbled and shattered, the Sailo villages began to view each other as adversaries and engaged in bloody feuds and war. First, the northern group of villages jointly fought against the southern.³⁴ This lasted about three years. This was followed by the western against the eastern.³⁵ The Pawi, on the other hand, did not indulge in bloody feuds amongst their own group but kept winning new territories and grafting chiefs in conquered villages.

The fluid political atmosphere was changing and restructuring the tribal or clan order in the villages. The Sailo chieftainship emerged, with the support of Lusei clans, more powerful than the older clans like Paite, the Thadou, Ralte, Chawngthu, and others. These older clans had waned within a short while in the rapid, fluid and violent torrent of life. Though some clans were still intact and large in population and sometimes formed the main strength of a village under a Sailo³⁶ chief, many were scattered in different villages or migrated down to the nearby plains, harried and hunted by their own brethren of more powerful villages.

Within this fluid and volatile biosphere of the tribal world, with impermanent villages, loyalties and affiliations were also temporary and makeshift. The Sailo chiefs seemed particularly perceptive and adroit in dealing with the situation and were largely able to exploit it to their advantage. The many, whose villages were decimated, were brought under their fold.³⁷ Even those from existing villages thronged to join them. By adjusting themselves as the situation demanded they were able

to instil confidence to their villagers.³⁸ Therefore, the Mizo villages that thrived under these difficult conditions greatly increased in strength and number. From the reports given by the British by the 19th century, some of them had even upto three thousand houses.

While these events were taking place on the western side of the Kolodyne, the Pawi were busy extending their territory to the south. As mentioned earlier, unlike the Sailo they did not indulge in bloody feuds amongst their own group but kept winning new territories and grafting chiefs in conquered villages. The Pawi, as compared to the Lusei groups, were on the whole, better off. Their source of power rested on having close linkage with their clan affiliations in Burma. This provided for stability and strength. They pushed against the Lakher³⁹ reducing them to tributary villages and continued to make forays in the Lusei territories and beyond. Even some Lusei village chiefs were obliged to pay tribute to the Pawi.⁴⁰ The Pawi chiefs were notorious for undertaking raids into far and distant villages and settlements. While the Pawi chiefs enthusiastically led war parties, the Sailo chiefs contented themselves with exhorting their warriors and getting their share of the spoils of a successful raid.

A factor that galvanized the raids made on each other and to the plains was the accessibility of guns that could be traded from Burma.⁴¹ Most of the Mizo chiefs sought to procure slaves from the plains that they traded for guns from the Burmese. These groups fanned out all around and, separately on their own, attacked their neighbouring areas. Different villages made successive raids during the years between 1826 and 1844 on Sylhet, Cachar, Tripura and Manipur.

These raids began to draw the attention of the British who by then had spread their imperial tentacle to the foothills. Initially, they tried to quell these raids by adopting conciliatory methods. However, the tide could not be stopped. There were more expeditions made in the second half of the 19th century where the Mizo tribes even attacked the British fort at Chittagong and raided the British tea estates in Cachar massacring people, looting, burning and taking prisoners. Aside from suffering humiliation that these were now British subjects, the British felt particularly wounded with having their kindred murdered. This reached a climax with Bengkhuaia, a Pawi chief,

killing Winchester, a tea planter and making off with Winchester's seven-year-old child, Mary. The British retaliated by sending military expeditions to the hills. They made two big pushes into the hills, established garrisons in the north and south, and with their better arms and organization, were able to completely defeat the Mizo tribes. The Mizo tribes were not only contained but were brought within the British colonial rule. The "Lushai Hills"⁴² was formally incorporated into the Assam administration by a proclamation on 1st April 1898. British rule brought in tight measures and regulations that totally shattered the given ecological conditions that determined the nature of Mizo culture and worldview.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Some of the earlier writers have been criticized as being clan-centric and narrow. It is largely true that many writers have till late, equated the word Mizo with Lusei, whereas Lusei covers only a segment of the tribes living in Mizoram. The word Mizo does not suggest any specific clan or sub-tribe or tribe, whatever the case may be. However, the Duhlian dialect, which was the dialect of the Lusei forms the common lingua franca of these people (Mizo) today. Those who still hold on to their own dialects and have been removed from the mainspring of Mizo cultural and political sphere-Mizoram, have developed a certain amount of alienation. This is particularly in the context of the tribes who, before colonial rule, have migrated to Manipur and Cachar, and Tripura.
2. In this connection, it may be pointed that K.L. Vumson's book *Zo History* (Aizawl, undated), offers a strong suggestion of linkage with the ZORO movement aiming to unite, or better, to reunite the "Zo people". The time of writing coincides with the very time when the movement was at its height.
3. One even suggests that Mizo are Jews by origin! Interestingly, this has been accepted by many leading to the "revival" of some form of ritual held to be Jewish, and the emigration of quite a number of people to Israel. It has continued to delude a very large number of people and is seemingly making more headway. Myer Samra was of the opinion that 'Whereas conventional Christianity depicted their ancestors in a humiliating mould, the redefinition of themselves as descendents of Israelites - made possible by the appearance of Revivalist Christianity earlier this century - offers the tribals a more attractive world view of their past, and positive perspectives for their future'. (Introductory abstract): Myer Samra, "Judaism in Manipur and Mizoram By-Product of Christian Mission" *Seminar Papers: Studies in the Minority Nationalities of Northeast India - The Mizos*, eds. J.V. Hluna, Sangkima and Romesh Buragohain (Aizawl, Mizoram, 1992), p. 63.

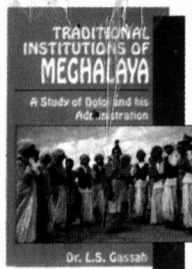
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4. P. Lalnithanga, *Mizoram*, from States of our Union series (New Delhi, 1997), p. 18.
5. Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (California, 1973), p. 317.
6. Charles Singer et al., *A History of Technology* (Oxford, England, 1978), p. 64.
7. J.D. Bernal, *Science in History, Vol. 1*, (England, 1954), p.74.
8. Eric Wolfe, *Europe and the People Without History*, (New York, 1990), p.30.
9. J.N. Phukan, "The Late Home of Migration of the Mizos", in J.V. Hluna et al. (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 10.
10. Eric Wolfe, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
11. Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society* (Reprint-Calcutta, 1982), p. 54.
12. K.L. Vumson, *op. cit.*, p. 30. Vumson even claims that Zo people 'built Kale Temple'.
13. F.K. Lehman, *The Structure of Chin Society* (Illinois, 1963), p.30. Lehman mentions a 13th century Burmese inscription alluding to Chins as "allies" or "comrades".
14. K.L Vumson, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
15. Lalthangliana, *History of Mizo in Burma* (Aizawl, 1975), p.19.
16. C. Laitanga, *Paite in Mizoram* (Aizawl, 1988), p. 26.
17. Emmanuel Terray, *Marxism and Primitive Societies* (Paris, 1969), p. 116.
18. C. Laitanga, *Pawih Chanchin* (Aizawl, 1988), p. 58.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Interestingly, with regard to the beginnings of the Sailo chieftainship, the situation under which the contract was drawn up between the Hnamte clan and Zahmuaka, and the very contract itself, fulfils the 'social contract' theory as expounded by Locke.
- * This was not always imperative as the considerations for survival allowed for chiefs to be grafted from other clans and villages. Oral tradition alludes to the case where the Hnamte clan had difficulty choosing a successor to their dead chief from within their own clan. They approached Zahmuaka from another village. Zahmuaka had many sons. Subsequently, all of Zahmuaka's seven sons also became chiefs. His grandson Sailova's line had the most successful chiefs of the Lusei clans and incorporated many other clans within their fold. By the turn of the 19th century, the Sailo had become the main pedigree of chiefs among the Mizo save for the Pawi and Mara who still had chiefs from within their own tribe.
21. Zatluanga, *Mizo Chanchin* (Aizawl, 1966), p. 47.
22. The Falam, the Halkha and the Sukte were collectively known as the Pawi by the Lusei group. While the Lusei and cognate clans tied their hair at the back of their heads, the Pawi tied theirs on their forehead (much like the Sikhs). Nowadays, the Pawi of Mizoram prefer to be called Lai.
23. B. Sangkhuma, *Mizo Thawnthu* (Aizawl, 1992), p. 45.
24. This is accepted as fact by all Mizos
25. The old name of Champhai was derived from the name of a Hmar clan known as Chawnchhim. The name of two rivers in Mizoram today — Mat and Tut, is attributed to the Darlong who are now settled in Tripura.

26. B. Sangkhuma, *op. cit.* Sangkhuma mentions that according to a Hmar oral tradition, they were taught rice cultivation during this time by the plains people.
27. Shakespeare, *The Lushei Kuki Clans*, (London, 1912) p.,
28. All the earlier Mizo writers agree on this – K. Zawla, *Mizo Pi Pu Nun* (Aizawl, 1964), p. 47; V.L Siama, *Mizo History* (Aizawl, 1953), p.17; Liangkhaia, *Mizo Chanchin* (Aizawl, 1951), p. 47.
29. James Dokhuma, *Hmanlai Mizo Kalphung* (Aizawl, 1990), p. 7.
30. This is a straight, flat-ended blade sharpened on one side and at a slant. The blade portion is generally about a foot long broadening out from the handle to the end, from about an inch to over three inches. It is hafted into a handle about six inches long. The handle is preferably made of bamboo root or hardwood.
31. The blacksmith's share (*thirdengsa*) was a portion of the back, while that of the chief (*sachhiah*) was a whole foreleg.
32. Daman Singh, *The Last Frontier* (New Delhi, 1996), p. 14.
33. This is established through oral sources and unanimously agreed upon by all Mizo writers. Dates are calculated from family lineage.
34. Two Sailo chiefs, Vuta of the north and Lalpuithanga of the south vied for a mountain range that brought all the Sailo chiefs to take up sides. After three years of bloody feud, the northern group emerged victorious.
35. The occasion for this war was provided by Liankhama and Lalkhama vieing for Tuali's hand. It ended inconclusively due to a famine brought about by the bamboo flowering (*Thingtam*) causing rats to multiply at an extraordinarily high rate devouring all the rice before harvest. This cyclical (occurring every fifty years) flowering of bamboo is a peculiar ecological syndrome of Mizoram.
36. Shakespeare observed that in some Lusei villages Ralte as a language was dominant and even the chief had to speak in the dialect to those belonging to that group in the village. They had a locality (*veng*) of their own in the village with their own *zawlbuk*. On festivals, they were to start a day after the Lusei, 'and if a human sacrifice is necessary, they enjoy the privilege of providing the offering'
37. This was formalized through a process known as *Tuklu*. The person, after being found acceptable, made a solemn oath, before an outstretched blade, to the chief clan members by whom he was to be adopted. After such a commitment was made, the person was inducted within the clan structure, bestowed a new identity, and his past affiliations buried and forgotten. In fact, people found or heard making references of the person's past were punishable by law. Interestingly, some families, in recent years, have by their own choice, reverted back into their own original clan or tribe.
38. Their flexibility even won them more people, such as those under the Zadeng. The chiefs who displayed arrogance and cruelty were abandoned en-masse by their people leaving their villages depopulated and vulnerable.
39. The Lakher generally prefer to be called Mara. Lakher is supposed to be a Lusei word to designate them and which is sometimes held to be derogatory.

40. Alexander Mackenzie, *The North East Frontier of India* (Calcutta, 1884), p. 296.
41. *Ibid.*
42. The larger part of the Pawi group, along with some other groups, were not incorporated within the 'Lushai Hills'. These were tagged to the Burmese administration and have to this day remained within Burma as 'Chins' occupying the area contiguous to eastern Burma (Myanmar) known as Chin Hills.



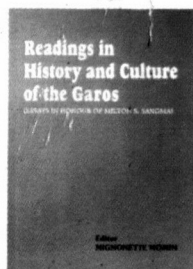
Traditional Institutions of Meghalaya
A Study of Doloi & his Administration
Dr. L.S. Gassah

Of late, some books have been written on the people of North-

East India, but they do not deal specifically with traditional institutions *per se*.

It is the author's endeavour to bring out in this book the role, functions, pattern and structural determinants of leadership under the traditional system of administration as well as bring out the effects of British Administration and the Autonomous District Council on traditional institutions and leadership. Keeping the broad spectrum in mind, the author has attempted to analyse the situation as it existed in the past and at present among the Jaintias of Meghalaya and critically examine how tradition, continuity and change have worked in the society under study which has experienced a number of changes throughout the long period of its history.

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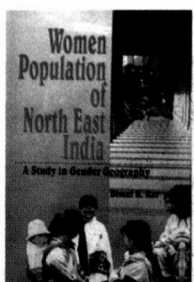
Readings in History and Culture of the Garos

Mignonette Momin (Ed.)

This collection of essays aims at making a beginning to fill in

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